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FACT SHEET
on
THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE

In his speech of March 23, 1983, President Reagan presented his vision of a future in which nations could live secure in the knowledge that their national security did not rest upon the threat of nuclear retaliation, but rather on the ability to defend against potential attacks. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) research program is designed to determine whether, and if so, how advanced defensive technologies could contribute to the realization of this vision.

The Strategic Context

The U.S. SDI research program is wholly compatible with the Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, is comparable to research permitted by the ABM Treaty which the Soviets have been conducting for many years, and is a prudent hedge against Soviet breakout from ABM Treaty limitations through the deployment of a territorial ballistic missile defense. These important facts deserve emphasis. However, the basic intent behind the Strategic Defense Initiative is best explained and understood in terms of the strategic environment we face for the balance of this century and into the next.

The Challenges We Face. Our nation and those nations allied with us face a number of challenges to our security. Each of these challenges imposes its own demands and presents its own opportunities. Preserving peace and freedom is, and always will be, our fundamental goal. The essential purpose of our military forces, and our nuclear forces in particular, is to deter aggression and coercion based upon the threat of military aggression. The deterrence provided by U.S. and Allied military forces has permitted us to enjoy peace and freedom. However, the nature of the military threat has changed and will continue to change in very fundamental ways in the next decade. Unless we adapt our response, deterrence will become much less stable and our susceptibility to coercion will increase dramatically.

Our Assumptions About Deterrence. For the past twenty years, we have based our assumptions on how deterrence can best be assured on the basic idea that if each side were able to maintain the ability to threaten retaliation against any attack and thereby impose on an aggressor costs that were clearly out of balance with any potential gains, this would suffice to prevent conflict. Our idea of what our forces had to hold at risk to deter aggression has changed over time. Nevertheless, our basic reliance on nuclear retaliation provided by offensive nuclear forces, as the essential means of deterring aggression, has not changed over this period.

This basic idea -- that if each side maintained roughly equal forces and equal capability to retaliate against attack, stability and deterrence would be maintained -- also served as the foundation for the U.S. approach to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process of the 1970's. At the time that process began, the U.S. concluded that deterrence based on the capability of offensive retaliatory forces was not only sensible, but necessary, since we believed at the time that neither side could develop the technology for defensive systems which could effectively deter the other side.

Today, however, the situation is fundamentally different. Scientific developments and several emerging technologies now do offer the possibility of defenses that did not exist and could hardly have been conceived earlier. The state of the art of defense has now progressed to the point where it is reasonable to investigate whether new technologies can yield options, especially non-nuclear options, which could permit us to turn to defense not only to enhance deterrence, but to allow us to move to a more secure and more stable long-term basis for deterrence.

Of equal importance, the Soviet Union has failed to show the type of restraint, in both strategic offensive and defensive forces, that was hoped for when the SALT process began. The trends in the development of Soviet strategic offensive and defensive forces, as well as the growing pattern of Soviet deception and of non-compliance with existing agreements, if permitted to continue unchecked over the long-term, will undermine the essential military balance and the mutuality of vulnerability on which deterrence theory has rested.

Soviet Offensive Improvements. The Soviet Union remains the principal threat to our security and that of our allies. As a part of its wide-ranging effort further to increase its military capabilities, the Soviet Union's improvement of its ballistic missile force, providing increased prompt, hard target kill capability, has increasingly threatened the survivability of forces we have deployed to deter aggression. It has posed an especially immediate challenge to our land-based retaliatory forces and to the leadership structure that commands them. It equally threatens many critical fixed installations in the United States and in allied nations that support the nuclear retaliatory and conventional forces which provide our collective ability to deter conflict and aggression.

Improvement of Soviet Active Defenses. At the same time, the Soviet Union has continued to pursue strategic advantage through the development and improvement of active defenses. These active defenses provide the Soviet Union a steadily increasing capability to counter U.S. retaliatory forces and those of our allies, especially if our forces were to be degraded by a Soviet first strike. Even today, Soviet active defenses are extensive.

For example, the Soviet Union possesses the world's only currently deployed anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system, deployed to protect Moscow. The Soviet Union is currently improving all elements of this system. It also has the world's only deployed anti-satellite (ASAT) capability. It has an extensive air defense network and it is aggressively improving the quality of its radars, interceptor aircraft, and surface-to-air missiles. It also has a very extensive network of ballistic missile early warning radars. All of these elements provide them an area of relative advantage in strategic defense today, and, with logical evolutionary improvement, could provide the foundation of decisive advantage in the future.

Improvement in Soviet Passive Defenses. The Soviet Union is also spending significant resources on passive defensive measures aimed at improving the survivability of its own forces, military command structure, and national leadership. These efforts range from providing rail and road mobility for its latest generation of ICBMs to extensive hardening of various critical installations.

Soviet Research and Development on Advanced Defenses. For over two decades, the Soviet Union has pursued a wide range of strategic defensive efforts, integrating both active and passive elements. The resulting trends have shown steady improvement and expansion of Soviet defensive capability. Furthermore, current patterns of Soviet research and development, including a long-standing and intensive research program in many of the same basic technological areas which our SDI program will address, indicate that these trends will continue apace for the foreseeable future. If unanswered, continued Soviet defensive improvements will further erode the effectiveness of our own existing deterrent, based as it is now almost exclusively on the threat of nuclear retaliation by offensive forces. Therefore, this long-standing Soviet program of defensive improvements, in itself, poses a challenge to deterrence which we must address.

Soviet Non-compliance and Verification. Finally, the problem of Soviet non-compliance with arms control agreements in both the offensive and defensive areas, including the ABM Treaty, is a cause of very serious concern. Soviet activity in constructing their new phased-array radar near Krasnoyarsk, in Central Siberia, has very immediate and ominous consequences. When operational, this radar, due to its location, will increase the Soviet Union's capability to deploy a territorial ballistic missile defense. Recognizing that such radars would make such a contribution, the ABM Treaty expressly banned the construction of such radars at such locations as one of the primary mechanisms for ensuring the effectiveness of the Treaty. The Soviet Union's activity with respect to this radar is in direct violation of the ABM Treaty.

Against the backdrop of this Soviet pattern of non-compliance with existing arms control agreements, the Soviet Union is also taking other actions which affect our ability to verify Soviet compliance. Some Soviet actions, like their increased use of encryption during testing, are directly aimed at degrading our ability to monitor treaty compliance. Other Soviet actions, too, contribute to the problems we face in monitoring Soviet compliance. For example, Soviet increases in the number of their mobile ballistic missiles, especially those armed with multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles, and other mobile systems, will make verification less and less certain. If we fail to respond to these trends, we could reach a point in the foreseeable future where we would have little confidence in our assessment of the state of the military balance or imbalance, with all that implies for our ability to control escalation during crises.

Responding to the Challenge. In response to this long-term pattern of Soviet offensive and defensive improvements, the United States is compelled to take certain actions designed both to maintain security and stability in the near-term, and to ensure these conditions in the future. We must act in three main areas.

Retaliatory Force Modernization. First, we must modernize our offensive nuclear retaliatory forces. This is necessary to reestablish and maintain the offensive balance in the near-term, and to create the strategic conditions that will permit us to pursue complementary actions in the areas of arms reduction negotiations and defensive research. For our part, in 1981 we embarked on our strategic modernization program aimed at reversing a long period of decline. This modernization program was specifically designed to preserve stable deterrence and, at the same time, to provide the incentives necessary to cause the Soviet Union to join us in negotiating significant reductions in the nuclear arsenals of both sides.

In addition to the U.S. strategic modernization program, NATO is modernizing its Longer-range Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (LRINF). Our British and French allies also have underway important programs to improve their own national strategic nuclear retaliatory forces. The U.S. SDI research program does not negate the necessity of these U.S. and allied programs. Rather, the SDI research program depends upon our collective and national modernization efforts to maintain peace and freedom today as we explore options for future decision on how we might enhance security and stability over the longer term.

New Deterrent Options. However, over the long run, the trends set in motion by the pattern of Soviet activity, and the Soviets' persistence in that pattern of activity, suggest that continued long-term dependence on offensive forces may not provide a stable basis for deterrence. In fact, should these trends be permitted to continue and the Soviet investment in both offensive and defensive capability proceed unrestrained and unanswered, the resultant condition could destroy the theoretical and empirical foundation on which deterrence has rested for a generation.

Therefore, we must now also take steps to provide future options for ensuring deterrence and stability over the long-term, and we must do so in a way that allows us both to negate the destabilizing growth of Soviet offensive forces and to channel long-standing Soviet propensities for defenses toward more stabilizing and mutually beneficial ends. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is specifically aimed towards these goals. In the near term, the SDI program also responds directly to the ongoing and extensive Soviet anti-ballistic missile effort, including the existing Soviet deployments permitted under the ABM Treaty. The SDI research program provides a necessary and powerful deterrent to any near-term Soviet decision to expand rapidly its anti-ballistic missile capability beyond that contemplated by the ABM Treaty. This, in itself, is a critical task. However, the overriding, long-term importance of SDI is that it offers the possibility of reversing the dangerous military trends cited above by moving to a better, more stable basis for deterrence, and by providing new and compelling incentives to the Soviet Union for seriously negotiating reductions in existing offensive nuclear arsenals.

The Soviet Union recognizes the potential of advanced defense concepts -- especially those involving boost, post-boost, and mid-course defenses -- to change the strategic situation. In our investigation of the potential these systems offer, we do not seek superiority or to establish a unilateral advantage. However, if the promise of SDI technologies is proven, the destabilizing Soviet advantage can be redressed. And, in the process, deterrence will be strengthened significantly and placed on a foundation made more stable by reducing the role of ballistic missile weapons and by placing greater reliance on defenses which threaten no one.

Negotiation and Diplomacy. During the next ten years, the U.S. objective is a radical reduction in the power of existing and planned offensive nuclear arms, as well as the stabilization of the relationship between nuclear offensive and defense arms, whether on earth or in space. We are even now looking forward to a period of transition to a more stable world, with greatly reduced levels of nuclear arms and an enhanced ability to deter war based upon the increasing contribution of non-nuclear defenses against offensive nuclear arms. A world free of the threat of military aggression and free of nuclear arms is an ultimate objective to which we, the Soviet Union, and all other nations can agree.

To support these goals, we will continue to pursue vigorously the negotiation of equitable and verifiable agreements leading to significant reductions of existing nuclear arsenals. As we do so, we will continue to exercise flexibility concerning the mechanisms used to achieve reductions, but will judge these mechanisms on their ability to enhance the security of the United States and our allies, to strengthen strategic stability, and to reduce the risk of war.

At the same time, the SDI research program is and will be conducted in full compliance with the ABM Treaty. If the research yields positive results, we will consult with our allies about the potential next steps. We would then, consult and negotiate, as appropriate, with the Soviet Union, pursuant to the terms of the ABM Treaty, which provide for such consultations, on how deterrence might be strengthened through the phased introduction of defensive systems into the force structures of both sides. This commitment does not mean that we would give the Soviets a veto over the outcome anymore than the Soviets have a veto over our current strategic and intermediate-range programs. Our commitment in this regard reflects our recognition that, if our research yields appropriate results, we should seek to move forward in a stable way. We have already begun the process of bilateral discussion in Geneva needed to lay the foundation for the stable integration of advanced defenses into the forces of both sides at such time as the state of the art and other considerations may make it desirable to do so.

The Soviet Union's View of SDI

As noted above, the USSR has long had a vigorous research, development and deployment program in defensive systems of all kinds. In fact, over the last two decades the Soviet Union has invested as much overall in its strategic defenses as it has in its massive strategic offensive buildup. As a result, today it enjoys certain important advantages in the area of active and passive defenses. The Soviet Union will certainly attempt to protect this massive, long-term investment.

Allied Views Concerning SDI

Our allies understand the military context in which the Strategic Defense Initiative was established and support the SDI research program. Our common understanding was reflected in the statement issued following my meeting with Prime Minister Thatcher in December, to the effect that:

-- first, the United States and Western aim was not to achieve superiority, but to maintain the balance, taking account of Soviet developments;

-- second, that SDI-related deployment would, in view of treaty obligations, have to be a matter for negotiations;

-- third, the overall aim is to enhance, and not to undermine deterrence; and,

-- fourth, East-West negotiations should aim to achieve security with reduced levels of offensive systems on both sides.

This common understanding is also reflected in other statements since then -- for example, the principles suggested recently by the Federal Republic of Germany that:

-- the existing NATO strategy of flexible response must remain fully valid for the Alliance as long as there is no more effective alternative for preventing war; and,

-- the Alliance's political and strategic unity must be safeguarded. There must be no zones of different degrees of security in the Alliance, and Europe's security must not be decoupled from that of North America.

SDI Themes

In explaining the SDI research program, there are a dozen cogent themes that capture the direction and scope of the program:

1. The aim of SDI is not to seek superiority, but to maintain the strategic balance and thereby assure stable deterrence.

A central theme in Soviet propaganda is the charge that SDI is designed to secure military superiority for the U.S. Put in the proper context of the strategic challenge that we and our allies face, our true goals become obvious and clear. Superiority is certainly not our purpose. Nor is the SDI program offensive in nature. The SDI program is a research program aimed at seeking better ways to ensure U.S. and allied security, using the increased contribution of defenses -- defenses that threaten no one.

2. Research will last for some years. We intend to adhere strictly to ABM Treaty limitations and will insist that the Soviets do so as well.

We are conducting a broad based research program, in full compliance with the ABM Treaty, and with no decision made to proceed beyond research. The SDI research program is a complex one that must be carried out on a broad front of technologies. It is not a program where all resource considerations are secondary to a schedule. Instead it is a responsible, organized research program that is aggressively seeking cost-effective approaches for defending the United States and our Allies against the threat of nuclear-armed and conventionally-armed ballistic missiles of all ranges. We expect that the research will proceed so that initial development decisions could be made in the early nineties.

3. We do not have any preconceived notions about the defensive options the research may generate. We will not proceed to development and deployment unless the research indicates that defenses meet strict criteria.

The US is pursuing the broadly based SDI research program in an objective manner. We have no preconceived notions about the outcome of the research program. We do not anticipate that we will be in a position to approach any decision to proceed with development or deployment based on the results of this research for a number of years.

We have identified key criteria that will be applied to the results of this research whenever they become available. Some options which could provide interim capabilities may be available earlier than others, and prudent planning demands that we maintain options against a range of contingencies. However, the primary thrust of the SDI research program is not to focus on generating options for the earliest development/deployment decision, but options which best meet our identified criteria.

4. Within the SDI research program, we will judge defenses to be desirable only if they are survivable and cost-effective at the margin.

Two areas of concern expressed about SDI are that deployment of defensive systems would harm crisis stability and that it would fuel a runaway proliferation of Soviet offensive arms. We have identified specific criteria to address these fears appropriately and directly.

Our survivability criterion responds to the first concern. If a defensive system were not adequately survivable, an adversary could very well have an incentive in a crisis to strike first at vulnerable elements of the defense. Application of this criterion will ensure that such a vulnerable system would not be deployed, and, consequently, that the Soviets would have no incentive nor prospect of overwhelming it.

Our cost-effectiveness criterion will ensure that any deployed defensive system would create a powerful incentive not to respond with additional offensive arms, since those arms would cost more than the additional defensive capability needed to defeat them. This is much more than an economic argument, although it is couched in economic terms. We intend to consider, in our evaluation of options generated by SDI research, the degree to which certain types of defensive systems, by their nature, encourage an adversary to try simply to overwhelm them with additional offensive capability, while other systems can discourage such a counter effort. We seek defensive options which provide clear disincentives to attempts to counter them with additional offensive forces.

In addition, we are pressing to reduce offensive nuclear arms through the negotiation of equitable and verifiable agreements. This effort includes reductions in the number of warheads on ballistic missiles to equal levels significantly lower than exist today.

5. It is too early in our research program to speculate on the kinds of defensive systems -- whether ground-based or space-based and with what capabilities -- that might prove feasible and desirable to develop and deploy.

Discussion of the various technologies under study is certainly needed to give concreteness to the understanding of the research program. However, speculation about various types of defensive systems that might be deployed is inappropriate at this time. The SDI is a broad-based research program investigating many technologies. We currently see real merit in the potential of advanced technologies providing for a layered defense, with the possibility of negating a ballistic missile at various points after launch. We feel that the possibility of a layered defense both enhances confidence in the overall system and compounds the problem of a potential aggressor in trying to defeat such a defense. However, the paths to such a defense are numerous.

Along the same lines, some have asked about the role of nuclear-related research in the context of our ultimate goal of non-nuclear defenses. While our current research program certainly emphasizes non-nuclear technologies, we will continue to explore the promising concepts which use nuclear energy to power devices which could destroy ballistic missiles at great distances. Further, it is useful to study these concepts to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of similar defensive systems that an adversary may develop for use against future U.S. surveillance and defensive or offensive systems.

6. The purpose of the defensive options we seek is clear -- to find a means to destroy attacking ballistic missiles before they can reach any of their potential targets.

We ultimately seek a future in which nations can live in peace and freedom, secure in the knowledge that their national security does not rest upon the threat of nuclear retaliation. Therefore, the SDI research program will place its emphasis on options which provide the basis for eliminating the general threat posed by ballistic missiles. Thus, the goal of our research is not, and cannot be, simply to protect our retaliatory forces from attack.

If a future President elects to move toward a general defense against ballistic missiles, the technological options that we explore will certainly also increase the survivability of our retaliatory forces. This will require a stable concept and process to manage the transition to the future we seek. The concept and process must be based upon a realistic treatment of not only U.S. but Soviet forces and out-year programs.

7. U.S. and Allied security remains indivisible. The SDI program is designed to enhance Allied security as well as U.S. security. We will continue to work closely with our allies to ensure that, as our research progresses, Allied views are carefully considered.

This has been a fundamental part of U.S. policy since the inception of the Strategic Defense Initiative. We have made a serious commitment to consult, and such consultations will precede any steps taken relative to the SDI research program which may affect our allies.

8. If and when our research criteria are met, and following close consultation with our allies, we intend to consult and negotiate, as appropriate, with the Soviets pursuant to the terms of the ABM Treaty, which provide for such consultations, on how deterrence could be enhanced through a greater reliance by both sides on new defensive systems. This commitment should in no way be interpreted as according the Soviets a veto over possible future defensive deployments. And, in fact, we have already been trying to initiate a discussion of the offense-defense relationship and stability in the Defense and Space Talks underway in Geneva to lay the foundation to support such future possible consultations.

If, at some future time, the U.S., in close consultation with its allies, decides to proceed with deployment of defensive systems, we intend to utilize mechanisms for U.S./Soviet consultations provided for in the ABM Treaty. Through such mechanisms, and taking full account of the Soviet Union's own expansive defensive systems research program, we will seek to proceed in a stable fashion with the Soviet Union.

9. It is our intention and our hope that, if new defensive technologies prove feasible, we (in close and continuing consultation with our allies) and the Soviets will jointly manage a transition to a more defense-reliant balance.

Soviet propagandists have accused the U.S. of reneging on commitments to prevent an arms race in space. This is clearly not true. What we envision is not an arms race; rather, it is just the opposite -- a jointly managed approach designed to maintain, at all times, control over the mix of offensive and defensive systems of both sides, and thereby increase the confidence of all nations in the effectiveness and stability of the evolving strategic balance.

10. SDI represents no change in our commitment to deterring war and enhancing stability.

Successful SDI research and development of defense options would not lead to abandonment of deterrence, but rather to an enhancement of deterrence and an evolution in the weapons of deterrence through the contribution of defensive systems that threaten no one. We would deter a potential aggressor by making it clear that we could deny him the gains he might otherwise hope to achieve rather than merely threatening him with costs large enough to outweigh those gains.

U.S. policy supports the basic principle that our existing method of deterrence, and NATO's existing strategy of flexible response, remain fully valid, and must be fully supported, as long as there is no more effective alternative for preventing war. It is in clear recognition of this obvious fact that the U.S. continues to pursue so vigorously its own strategic modernization program and so strongly supports the efforts of its allies to sustain their own commitments to maintain the forces, both nuclear and conventional, that provide today's deterrence.

11. For the foreseeable future, offensive nuclear forces and the prospect of nuclear retaliation will remain the key element of deterrence. Therefore, we must maintain modern, flexible and credible strategic nuclear forces.

This point reflects the fact that we must simultaneously use a number of tools to achieve our goals today while looking for better ways to achieve our goals over the longer term. It expresses our basic rationale for sustaining the U.S. strategic modernization program and the rationale for the critically needed national modernization programs being conducted by the United Kingdom and France.

12. Our ultimate goal is to eliminate nuclear weapons entirely. By necessity, this is a very long-term goal, which requires, as we pursue our SDI research, equally energetic efforts to diminish the threat posed by conventional arms imbalances, both through conventional force improvements, and the negotiation of arms reductions and confidence building measures.

We fully recognize the contribution nuclear weapons make to deterring conventional aggression. We equally recognize the destructiveness of war by conventional and chemical means, and the need both to deter such conflict and to reduce the danger posed by the threat of aggression through such means.